The ARCHER'S Tale

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JEFFREY ARCHER closed his eyes and grinned contentedly to himself as his mind wandered back three decades to that fateful night at Victoria Station. Thank God he'd done the right thing, he thought, instead of listening to that idiot friend of his, and paying the damned woman off.

He'd taken her call at his country home; thankfully Mary was in the bath; he dreaded to think what might have happened if she'd picked up the phone. How had this little harlot got his number, he couldn't have been that drunk, surely?

"No, I'll meet you in person", he'd told her, "I don't want anyone else involved. Two thousand pounds, and you'll go abroad for good?"
"Yes," she'd agreed.
"And no one will know?"
"No, I won't tell anyone."
"All right, get your ticket and I'll meet you half an hour before you depart. You have your passport and everything else in order?"
"Yes", she said.
"Right, don't phone this number again; it's not safe."
As soon as she hung up, Archer made another call. He remembered what his good friend Denis had told him about discretion, but there were times when discretion was most definitely not the better part of valour.

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As his taxi pulled up at the station he'd felt their eyes upon him, watching his every move. He wandered around for a bit, doing his best to look conspicuous, then walked briskly towards the station clock. He recognised her instantly; God, she was repulsive, what had possessed him to pay for sex with a woman like that when he had the ever fragrant English rose Mary waiting for him at home?

No, he hadn't been with her; he'd never met her, that was his story, and he was sticking to it. As he approached, she looked round, a nervous, furtive glance, and as they came eye to eye, he knew he'd made the right decision. God, how pathetic, what sort of mug did they take him for?

"MONICA COGHLAN?" he asked.
"Yes," she said.
"I have something for you."
He removed the brown paper package from his raincoat pocket, "Two thousand pounds". She held out her hand to take it, but he snatched it away saying "And you will never tell anyone who gave it to you?"

“No.”
“Or why?”
“No.”

He smiled, and held out the package firmly. She grasped it, and right on cue three men broke off from a nearby crowd of German tourists. Two of them were armed with cameras, the third was holding a pocket tape recorder; Archer recognised him although he couldn’t put a name to the face; he was a long time Fleet Street hack. “Smile Jeffrey”, he said.
Archer did just that, posing for the cameras. He was feeling supremely confident now.

Suddenly there was uproar; a shrill male voice shouted “Go! Go! Go!” and behind the photographers as if by magic appeared no fewer than a dozen police officers, some of them armed. There was shouting, swearing, and outright pandemonium as the journalists were wrestled to the ground as though they were wanted terrorists. A muscular blonde struggled out of a railwaywoman’s uniform, seized the diminutive Monica Coghlan by the arm, and dragged her away as she rattled off the words of the police caution. Then the Police Commissioner himself appeared out of the crowd, flanked by two senior detectives, one of them holding a megaphone.

“That’s right”, said Archer to himself, “full steam ahead”.

The next day it was all over the newspapers, though it wasn’t the story that one editor had hoped for.

Jeffrey Archer set up
Tory high flyer entrapment shock

Thatcher aide blackmail attempt

The *Daily Star* had cried foul, but Archer wasn’t letting them off that easily; he wanted them all charged with blackmail, extortion, and demanding money with menaces. Why should there be one law for the press and another for everyone else?

He’d got his wish, there had been a huge, high profile trial, and all of the conspirators from Monica Coghlan to the editor had been convicted. None of them had been sent to prison, but they’d got the message: mess with Jeffrey Archer at your peril.

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He grinned contentedly to himself again; could it really have been thirty years ago?

Suddenly he snapped out of his trance; the phone was ringing. No, he’d be down in five minutes, he’d just been rehearsing his opening speech, he lied with the fluency of a career politician. He sighed deeply, “Better get going”, he yawned, “can’t let Maggie down.”

Five minutes later he was waiting in the wings as the compère announced “Ladies and gentlemen, it is my great pleasure to announce our surprise guest who will present the inaugural Margaret Thatcher Memorial Lecture, the Prime Minister, Jeffrey Archer.”
He straightened his tie and walked onto the stage to thunderous applause.